

Alternative Stages goes 'Teacup Topsy'

Local playwright Jeff Stillwell's comedy-fable: Shakespeare, Starbucks and, blank verse, a mix and match that wows

By DALE BURROWS
For the *Enterprise*

What's hot? What's not? Those questions sell celeb mags. Last weekend, at the Wade James in Edmonds, on stage, an imaginative comedy and thoughtful fable, in blank verse, on stage and all at once, a Mad Hatter's Tea Party blew away those of us who showed up. It was a trip and a half in a little more than an hour and a half through an Alice-like wonderland and a half, ground-breaking in ways more than one.

The Mad Hatter's Tea Party was Alternative Stages' production of "Teacup Topsy," written, directed and acted in by Jeff Stillwell.

Marvel at the ambition: to apply Shakespearean language to American idiom, put dance, rhapsody and wisdom into big business swallowing up small business, wrap it all up in a personal feel for modern-day humanity and make it public for all to see. That is going some.

So how'd it play?

A mom-and-pop tea shop, a small-business landmark for

years, not unlike one you might find in downtown Edmonds, lacks for customers because they are all going to one of the Starbucks that is constantly popping up.

Mom and pop have gone on to their reward. Their lonely, luckless and lovely daughter, Lyla, keeps the tea shop going but just barely and only because of her faith in the legacy entrusted to her and with a little financial help from her deceased mom's best friend, the forever-grousing Mrs. Widdershins.

A homeless, constantly iambic-pentameter-spouting, wretch of a minstrel in rags, sitting because he is too world-weary to stand on his soap box, is waxing eloquent on poor Lyla's undeserved misfortune when, wonder of wonders, a stuttering, stammering corporate accountant happens by, takes a shine to damsel in distress and Stillwell's house of fun and games swings into wild party action, intellect stimulating

and emotion-stirring.

How Stillwell managed the tongue-twisting lines with frenzied-eyes rolling, only Lawrence Olivier could have possibly fathomed, it's beyond me. His Man In The Box was where he belonged; focused, reincarnated, engaging.

A lovelier, more ethereal, vulnerable vision of transcendental faith than Catherine Bailey's Lyla would be an auditioning director's impossible dream. Bailey's Lyla has to have been what Stillwell had in mind. She was entrancing.

True, Wendy Cohen started lines over again here and there, so what? Cohen had her Mrs. Widdershins underlying optimism surface up through a sourpuss's cynical take on the status quo, in the perfect place, at the perfect time and in an exhilarating way. Cohen lit me up when I didn't expect it.

Accountants can be more than numbers, decimal points and spreadsheets, Stillwell blue-printed one. Gary Nelson's could have been a cliché, heaven knows we get them. Nelson's



Contributed photo

Lonely Lyla (Catherine Bailey) presents a winning cup of tea to the love-struck, if mousy, Reginald (Gary Nelson) in Northwest playwright Jeff Stillwell's new fable, "Teacup Topsy."

was the blueprint made human. I liked the guy.

"Teacup Topsy" wasn't an easy watch. You had to let it in. It played if you paid; attention, that is.

Hats off to the Wade James for supporting, Driftwood Players for hosting, Driftwood Players for performing, Alternative Stages for performing and Jeff Stillwell for taking a chance on himself. Experimental theater that

I dares, it's close to my heart:

For information about Alternative Stages Festival of Shorts coming up July 9 & 10, visit www.driftwoodplayers.com or call 425-774-9600.

Reactions? Comments? E-mail Dale Burrows at entopinion@heraldnet.com or grayhost7@comcast.net.

New Space picks up on 'Dropped Stitch'

Edmonds-based playwright personalizes comedy

By DALE BURROWS
For *The Enterprise*

Mom and daughter eke out a living sewing. Mom's content. Daughter's bored. Neighbor guy's a flake. Enter stuffy landlord. Mom matchmakes. Daughter's annoyed. Stalemate.

In his program notes, playwright Jeff Stillwell explains his aim here to be about "creating an artist" — the daughter, presumably being the artist and her art, needlework. Stillwell's hope is to make her "difficult, scary, fulfilling"

and exciting.

"Stitch" doesn't succeed if you're looking for fast-paced slapstick, sight gags and outrageous behavior. It does if you're ready to empathize.

The linchpin is Manya Vee in the lead role. If she makes you feel the daughter's struggle to discover herself, then the suspense, drama and comedy work.

Assists come from Lynwood residents Elizabeth Pelham as mom and Jad Kassouf as the flake.

Pelham steers the white line between meddler and hands-off, she more nudg-

es than shoves. Kassouf shines as daydreaming guru, pretentious-funny on purpose. Together, these two make for a light, bright touch to Vee's serious side.

However, Stillwell's standout character is the stuffy landlord, who happens also to be a hotshot ad exec riding high. Robert Geller generates this dude into pure hilarity, all dynamite. Things happen when Geller postures. This actor makes snooty into obnoxious, sad, likeable, lovable, human comedy — a show highlight.

Overall, though, it is Vee who stews, searches, flounders and frustrates in monologue, dialogue and body language. She skipped

'A Dropped Stitch'

What: Edmonds playwright Jeff Stillwell's latest play.

When: Performances run through Oct. 16

Where: New Space, Northeast 175th Avenue and 15th Avenue Northeast in Shoreline.

Tickets: Call 425-776-3778 or visit newclassicstheatre.org

a beat here and there on opening night but, for me worked well in a major role. I left gratified. It's good to know you're not alone.

Reactions? *Comments?*
E-mail Dale Burrows at entopinion@heraldnet.com or grayghost7@comcast.net.



Contributed photo
Pompous Bertram (Robert Geller) woos a reluctant Bobbie (Manya Vee) as Mother (Elizabeth Pelham) helps out in Jeff Stillwell's new dramatic comedy, "A Dropped Stitch," which opened Sept. 30 at New Space Theatre in Shoreline.